

Kings and Poets: Self-Irony in Selected Poems by George Seferis and Derek Mahon

Kings cannot be claimed to be tremendously popular with contemporary Irish or Greek poets, except for one who has taken a prominent place in the twentieth-century literature for obvious reasons: Odysseus, king of Ithaca, the icon of modern displacement. For the same reason George Seferis made it one of his personas, epitome of both (his) individual experience and the general condition of humankind. Personally affected by the *Katastrofi* (expulsion of Greeks from Asia Minor in 1922), Seferis devoted one of his most famous cycles, *Mythistorema* (1933-34), mainly to this myth and the myth of another sea voyage, the Argo expedition. Many years later in Ireland Michael Longley, drawing on Homer perhaps most spectacularly of Irish poets, ventured on his reworking the *Odyssey* and the *Illiad* into contemporary Northern Irish context. In very few of these poems, if ever, one can divine Odysseus' royal descent. Otherwise both poets present the hero as a worn-out wanderer stripped of his kingship – which is of course how Homer treats him, but which now essentially reflects the anonymity of modern society on the one hand, and its prevailing individualism on the other.

This concern for “important” figures is balanced, if not overrun, by a different tendency, spanning the twentieth century from Joyce to Stoppard: paying attention to the margins of history, literature and myth. Already Seferis and, later, Irish poets – Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon – devoted some of their finest work to such peripheral figures. Seferis in one of his best known poems searches for traces of a figure

whose existence he speculates about on the basis of archaeological excavations and of *one* word from the *Illiad*: the king of Asini. Heaney in two poetic series explores the legend of a 7th century petty king of Ulster, Sweeney, known from a medieval Celtic royal cycle; accidentally or not, this king was also cursed and unable to return home, just as Odysseus. Mahon picks up a primitive mystic king figure, “The Last of the Fire Kings,” who wants to escape from home and thus “release [his people] from an ancient curse.” In another poem he departs from Seferis's *Mythistorema* for an “archaeological” expedition into “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” where he discovers the “lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii” (*Selected Poems* 63), which does not exhaust the theme of affinity with the Greek poet.

Before discussing instances of this correspondence, one must not neglect to mention the import of the Penguin Modern European Poets series on this particular fact. Just as the 1968 and later volumes stirred Irish poets' interest in contemporary Polish poetry, so did the 1966 publication of the “Four Greek Poets” (Cavafy, Seferis, Elytis and Gatsos) kindle their attraction to the Modern Greek one. The fact that these publications fell right before the exacerbation of the situation in Northern Ireland provides one of the keys to their significance; other factors, also connected with social and political background, entail the means of expression used by some of the Poles and Greeks presented in these volumes: irony and understatement (notably Cavafy the master, but also Seferis and Zbigniew Herbert¹), language of myth, insight into the past and into other cultures. These are all widespread in the twentieth century poetic practice as indirect methods of treating topical subjects – from politics to personal relationships – in order to avoid repression from totalitarian regimes, or to

¹ To continue analogies, Herbert was also inspired by Cavafy, drew a lot on Greek history and myth, and also “resuscitated” minor figures of history and literature, making them protagonists of some of his most famous poems, such as “Elegy of Fortinbras.”

escape journalism and bathos, or to draw analogies for the sake of understanding the situation.

More specifically, Seferis's and Mahon's poems we are going to refer to were written and/or published under grave circumstances. "The King of Asini" (Seferis, *Collected Poems* 134-136) bears the date "Asini, summer 1938 – Athens, Jan 1940": time of the Metaxas dictatorship and of the Second World War in Europe, which was to reach Greece within months. *Mythistorema* (*Collected Poems* 3-28) was written throughout the year 1934, when Seferis returned from his diplomatic service in London to his homeland torn by faction fights in between two coups d'état. Mahon published "Rage for Order" and "The Archaeologist" in *Lives* (1972) at the height of the conflict in the North; "The Last of the Fire Kings" and "A Disused Shed" followed three years later in *Snow Party* (1975) which opened with four translations from Cavafy, the first instance of Mahon's subsequently regular practice of incorporating translations in his own poetry collections. This set of circumstances attests to the position of the poet as witness – willing or not – to history that cannot be ignored.

Both poets are lonely visitors in distant, desolate places which are objectively linked to the past, or which the authors link to it by the power of imagination. In Seferis's "King of Asini" the poet acts as an archaeologist, for two years searching for the traces of the ancient king's existence in his former palace of Asini (close to Mycenae on the Peloponnese), now an excavation site. He is scanning the surroundings and scrutinising the ruins. Mahon's protagonists in "The Archaeologist" (*Lives* 12) are "flying in over the moors" above the "fallen stones / From the wrecked piles of burial cairns," spotting "a stone-age figure far below":² we are probably dealing with a prehistoric site.

Distance seems to be one of the crucial notions for both poems and relates to irony. The obvious distance is a chronolog-

² The poem was later renamed as "A Stone-Age Figure Far Below" in *Collected Poems* (42).

ical one. Then comes the communication gap – the mask the poet finds in Seferis's poem emits a deaf sound and hides nothing, the void; whereas the figure in Mahon's poem gesticulates wildly from far below, making his observers hypothesise about the meaning of his gestures. Both "archaeologists" encounter similar difficulties. There is no certainty about what they are looking for, if ever they are really looking for anything (specific). In Mahon's poem, there is no certainty at all which of the figures is meant to be the eponymous archaeologist. "They" are looking for "him" and "he" is looking for something. The identity games in both poems herald a specific type of irony.

This irony, popular in Modernism and Postmodernism, can be traced back to Romanticism and finds its expression in the distance towards the act of creation. Mahon is juggling ideas about the identity of his protagonist, offering us at least two versions: a stone-age figure and a local resident. We could accept the first version if that stone-age figure was not waving to the people on an airplane, breaking the illusion of temporal distance. The reader cannot decipher where a fact gives way to an idea and vice versa. The author enjoys the powers of the almighty, and additionally plays an omniscient prophet making an excursion into the future: "You must be mad, he *will* say . . ." (emphasis added). This fragment, uttered by the "local resident" and thus related to the second version of the protagonist's identity, should be a hypothesis. However, instead of using the modal "would" the author uses "will," lending himself an air of absolute surety.

A similar freedom in treating the characters occurs in the dubious identity of "them." In the first stanza they are passengers of the airplane, flying in like *deus ex machina* not only into space but also into time (the stone age) – and yet they are ironically hailed as "archaeological finds" by the person below ("He sees, at last, a sign of life"). Actually, "they" and "him" treat one another in this exact way, as a discovery. Moreover, the figure on the ground humorously disposes of the power over life and death, just like the author: he "damns

them to hell-fires." In the following stanza it is "them" who take over the search; archaeological, one should expect – but no, judging by their attributes it seems to be more of a rescue team:

When they come with poles, binoculars, whistles,
Blankets, and flasks, they will find him dead –

And yet, instead of a stray tourist, they find... a stone-age man! Back to archaeology... The reader is offered no clear-cut boundary between the real and the unreal, between who is who, or the present and the past. His efforts to demarcate identities are ruthlessly mocked in the last stanza, when he encounters a "local resident out for a walk / In tweeds and a hunting hat" as if taken out of the Monthly Python series. This perfectly composed gentleman on a country walk might have simply developed certain liking for the place; but he might just as well be... the archaeologist in disguise, a "scientist" talking to other "scientists":

..... You must be
Mad, he will say, to suppose this rock
Could accommodate life indefinitely;
Nobody comes here now but me.

In "The King of Asini," Seferis's speaker acts as an archaeologist, surrounded by colleagues and addressing one of them with a sort of "professional" question about the "find": the mask. His conclusion about it, "The king of Asini a void under the mask," refers, one may infer, not only to the fruitlessness or even futility of their search, but also to incomprehensibility of history. These archaeologists cannot access the past, which is visible but not intelligible. Mid-way through the text, the speaker assumes the role of a narrator and introduces the figure of a poet, supposedly his alter ego, judging from the provided place name of the poem's creation (Asini) and from his wondering about the fate of the dead that went missing from "our life." He finishes this part and this voice

with the line: "The poet a void." Clearly, he "replaces" the king of Asini with the poet, as if swapping masks; only to be back, in the last stanza, to square one: to the archaeologist surrounded by the bunch of his colleagues searching the site for the traces of the ancient king.

Neither Seferis nor Mahon conspicuously mark the border between shifting voices and identities. Seferis further switches between singular and plural voices, while Mahon – between vantage points. Seferis's speaker at various points of the text experiences visions related to the past, to the strangely symbolic surroundings, to literature (Homer) and to (his own) human experience. By doing so, he is pondering on the issues of memory as a form of existence; on the meaning and choices of history; on the relevance of individual history to the universal one; on the role of the poet; on the border between illusion and reality; and, last but not least, on the void and lack of communication in the turbulent times of the poem's creation. Some of these issues have been triggered by the complex definition of the term *κενό* (translated as "a void"). *Κενό* can indeed refer to the void in the physical sense; also, in the sense of a place or space where nothing exists (the futile search); to the space limited by "up" and "down" (like the surface of the mask and nothing underneath); to a gap, rupture of continuity (also in temporal terms, like the rupture between the ancient and modern Greece); and to the inner emptiness after a loss of something or someone (Μπαμπινιώτης 879). One can notice some of these aspects in Mahon's poem: uncertainty of the search and of existence; spatial distance (up and down); communication and knowledge gap; rupture with history. Eventually, self-irony.

This sense of incongruity of the expectation and reality, the sense of futility or at least doubt about the power of creation or the role of the poet as the memory keeper, his kind of pompous conviction about the significance of his activities in shaping the world or posing philosophical questions is what links "The King of Asini" with Mahon's "Rage for Order" (*Lives* 22-23). Mahon's poet, just like Seferis's, seems to be iso-

lated from the real life. The Greek one has been scanning an excavation site for over two years, strolling among unintelligible signs, pursuing the unknown, apparently far from the past events. His self-irony reaches its climax when he questions his own existence: "The poet a void." He experiences a kind of spleen, the hollowness of not only his own existence, but also of the world around epitomised in the mask. He also reflects upon the emptiness of history, encapsulated in the story of the king:

and his children statues
and his desires the fluttering of birds, and the wind
in the gaps between his thoughts, and his ships
anchored in a vanished port

Seferis's personal situation (the sense of exile due to the *Katastrofi*) and the situation of his country perfectly explain this state of mind; other factors that come into play is the inspiration he took from T.S. Eliot, and Eliot in turn from French Symbolists, notably Baudelaire; besides, the birth of Existentialism proper cannot be neglected. The connection of Seferis's writings with Eliot is well-known; but one should not disregard in this case the fertile relation not only to Baudelaire's *ennui*, but also to the type of self-irony which he does not name with this particular term, but which he creates on the occasion of discussing the dandy philosophy of life in *Mon cœur mis à nu*. Dandy is a tragic figure: he cannot escape certain duality of existence or sense of artificiality which he depicts as a constant awareness of his reflection in a mirror. Seferis's poet looking at the mask in "The King of Asini" and the dialogue of two poets in Mahon's "Rage for Order" come close to this type of self-irony.

At the beginning of his poem Mahon introduces an Irish poet preoccupied with his own "dying art," sitting somewhere high above the street ("high window") of the city seized by rioters, in Ulster immersed in sectarian fight: Nero fiddling over burning Rome. Hollowness in this poem of Ma-

hon's refers mainly to literary form; the protagonist's words are just empty "rhetorical / Device of a Claudian emperor," his thoughts an "eddy of semantic scruple." They have no bearing on real life. The real life lies in ruins: "the scorched gable end / And the burnt-out / Buses." One could repeat after Part 13 of Seferis's *Mythistorema*, "What were you looking for in front of ashes?" (*Selected Poems* 17); and yet the poet's diet in Mahon's "Rage for Order" are exactly ashes, as if he was trying to confront the situation. It becomes clear that by means of self-irony both Seferis and Mahon inquire into the value of poetry in the face of history.

Neither Seferis nor Mahon is completely pessimistic and self-ironic. At the beginning of the last stanza, Seferis allows us to watch a triumphant sunrise ("Shieldbearer, the sun climbed warring"), even though the blinded bat, symbol of the souls of the dead³ (and here of the wanted soul of the ancient king, too), finds death on this shield of light. Besides, among the images of transience, we are offered glimpses at eternity, embodied for instance in the shaded sea. Although its surface is described in lethal terms ("breast of a slain peacock"), the sea may also stand for infinity or homogeneity, receiving the company of "archaeologists" "like time without an opening in it." The term translated as "opening," *χάσμα*, apart from "crevasse," means the same as *κενό* in the sense of a gap, a break of continuity. Throughout the poem, the past accompanies the presence like its shadow ("a void . . . everywhere with us") proving its superficiality, but also remaining an unresolved mystery. The set of rhetorical questions about the afterlife culminates in the image of the bat flying out of the cave. One can also assume that seeking meaning and, perhaps, justice of history (rehabilitating people overlooked by writers-historians) articulates the poet's concern for modernity and his attempt at understanding it.

³ Allusion to the scene opening the last book of the *Odyssey*, when Hermes leads the souls of the dead suitors who scream around him like bats.

In the dialogue of two poets in "Rage for Order," the second poet acknowledges the imminent "need of his [the other, first, poet's] / Germinal ironies" to tame the "unstructurable sea" of reality around. In this very curious poem, irony has a double edge: for what else are "germinal ironies" if not the initially (ironically) mocked "wretched rage for order"? At the end of the poem these "ironies" come to be treated with full seriousness. Ultimately, irony in "Rage for Order" seems to be more powerful and effective a tool from the "desperate love" in history making, though both methods aim at imposing order on the anarchic reality. The latter is the road of chaotic revolutionary destruction of the old order and a construction of a new one, a true Romantic God-like poetic attitude full of grandeur:

Now watch me
As I make history,
Watch as I tear down

To built up
With a desperate love.

Irony reveals its double edge in the similarity of this pompousness to the first poet's stance ("the fitful glare," "his posture . . . Grandiloquent and / Deprecating," "rhetorical device"). At the end, however, that stance turns out to be the last resort: the first, isolated, poet feeds on ashes, which may imply his insight into history, and his irony is "germinal," i.e. productive in a long term, positive, evolutionary. We may align his approach with the view shared by other poets of the North, e.g. Heaney who claimed that at the outbreak of the conflict the poets felt that instead of direct engagement they had to contribute precisely the subtleties of their art to mark their protest against the situation ("Place and Displacement" 128). Of course, one should make a necessary remark on this occasion: among the problems the reader faces in respect to self-irony, which seems even more challenging than irony, is the existence of poetic personae and voices, i.e. the formal

distance between the author and the speaker of his poem. It cannot be overlooked, though, that the majority of poets refer to or quote various poetic attitudes not just for the sake of presenting them, but of discussing, opposing or considering their relevance to their own position and practice.

In another famous poem of almost the same period, Mahon invents multiple potential lives again,⁴ like in "The Archaeologist." "The Last of the Fire Kings" (*Selected Poems* 58-59) takes into consideration two alternative biographies in order to withdraw from active life or from life altogether. The figure of this spiritual king was borrowed from Frazer's anthropological oeuvre, *The Golden Bough*, from the passage where, among other "departmental kings of nature," he discusses Cambodian Kings of Fire and Water and the King of the Grove (Haughton 103). Accordingly, Mahon places his protagonist "in the sacred grove" and makes him dream of "a place out of time, / A palace of porcelain" with inheritors reclining leisurely during a feast, somewhere in between ancient Rome and later aristocratic culture. Ironically though, the scenery surrounding him brings to mind "Rage for Order" and transports the reader to contemporary Northern Ireland with its "sirens, bin-lids / And bricked-up windows." Mahon is yet another Irish poet, apart from Heaney, Paulin or Longley, who interrogates into the tribal forces behind the conflict, and who uses irony extensively in this context, just as Paulin does.

The protagonist's self-irony manifests itself in his denial of his own fate or destiny. He is the King of Fire, yet he is threatened by it: "Who lives by the sword / Dies by the sword." He wants to "break with tradition" and commit suicide rather than let himself be killed by the usurper and "perpetuate / The barbarous cycle." The "cycle" refers not only to his own life but to the life of his subjects steeped in the blood sacrifice

⁴ The practice characteristic also of Michael Longley's output of the same years, manifesting the troubled sense of identity of the Northern Irish poets on the one hand, and their artistic freedom on the other.

pattern (the North), and this is where his duality or self-irony resides: between his fate ("the ancient curse") and his public function as a head of "the fire-loving people." He protests against that fate and that function by drawing a line between himself and "the people"; but "they" claim his service and his life, demanding him to inhabit the same world, "die their creature and be thankful." It is highly improbable that he finally manages to "be through with history," as he claims midway through the poem, not only because his people impose that history on him, but also because he gives them, reluctantly as it may seem, the right to do so ("rightly perhaps," he comments on their demands). This clash between the individual and group (tribal) identity, between duty and free will is obviously related to the role of the poet, and as such verbalises personal self-irony of the author. Together with "Rage for Order" with its dichotomies of the "useful" and the "useless," the isolated and the adequate, of absence and presence; together with Seferis's "King of Asini" with the same opposition, further reinforced by the contrast of light and darkness – in "The Last of the Fire Kings" some phenomena are ironically undermined by their reverse.

"I, without a country, / I who go on struggling here" – these words from Seferis's *Mythistorema* (*Selected Poems* 20) could refer, literally or metaphorically, to both of Mahon's discussed poems and their protagonists, summing up two attitudes: of fight and (inner) exile. Furthermore, in Seferis's poem they are pronounced by Orestes, whose life revolved around revenge – and Mahon's both texts allude, more or less negatively, to vengeance. His "unstructurable sea" seems unescapable, just as Orestes' sea:

..... you can't
escape the sea that cradled you and that you search for
at this time of trial
.....
the sea you cannot find no matter how you run

Evident in all the poems under discussion, this sort of impossibility of escaping reality which nourished us and with which nonetheless we do not manage to communicate constitutes irony of fate. Tragic irony, one could say if it wasn't for the protagonist's awareness of the situation. Pure tragic irony appears in reference to mythological figures in Seferis's *Mythistorema* (whose title also plays on words: μυθιστόρημα meaning *novel* and μύθος – the *plot*, but since the whole cycle draws on various myths, it acquires this alternative sense). With the benefit of knowing mythology and history, modern wanderers are already conscious of the situation, as in Part 22 (*Selected Poems* 26):

So very much having passed before our eyes
that even our eyes saw nothing, but beyond
and behind was memory
.....
having known this fate of ours so well
wandering among the broken stones, three of six thousand years
searching in collapsed buildings that might have been our homes
trying to remember dates and heroic deeds:
will we be able?

having been bound and scattered,
having struggled, as they said, with non-existent difficulties
lost, then finding again a road
.....
will we be able to die as we should?

I have already pointed to chronological gap as an element of irony. One can find this accumulation of chronological planes in all of these poems: political present tense fuses with the mythical and/or historical one. Additionally, the mythical dimension stretches beyond time, like the sea-time "without an opening in it." A similar maritime "out-of-timeness" occurs in Mahon's "Rathlin" (*Selected Poems* 122) which could actually sum up this paragraph. Emerging from the sea "dream-time" and the "metaphysical wind," the visitors, like

Odysseus' company, land on an insular sanctuary of "oneiric species." The speaker, having left behind the "turbulent sea" of the Northern Irish conflict, compares the two worlds with an ironic understatement:

Bombs doze in the housing estates
But here they are through with history –

He seems to be quoting his own poem from a decade earlier; but this time the meaning of the phrasal "be through with" should be taken literally as "exhaustion," indicating experience rather than a final phase. In fact, it refers to the Rathlin massacre of the 17th century. The "peace" of the island is shattered with the screams of the past, and the visitors leave

Unsure among the pitching surfaces
Whether the future lies before us or behind.

They are transported into a timeless zone yet remain astutely aware of the present, like other figures of Mahon's and Seferis's poems under discussion: with the slight but significant difference that for Mahon it is the future and for Seferis memory that lies before/beyond and behind.

When discussing self-irony of both poets one cannot omit to mention "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" (*Selected Poems* 62-63) citing the ending of Seferis's *Mythistorema* (Part 24): "Let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels." Mahon uses a second-hand reference to the *Odyssey*: the descent of Odysseus into Hades. Mahon's "archaeologist" descends into Peruvian mines and into entrails of a burnt-out hotel, intruding upon the peace of the dead, here depicted as fungi (while the "flutter" echoes Homer's and Seferis's bat-souls). He is leading an uncanny expedition that discovers this "massive grave," and with grotesque irony he goes on to describe the "finds": "Magi, moonmen, / Powdery prisoners of the old regime." His flash-bulb has the power of the triumphant sun in "The King of Asini": light is a tool of

execution for the souls. Subject to the workings of tragic irony again, the prisoners get killed at liberation. This tragic irony was in operation in real life at the liberation of concentration camps which some prisoners did not live through; and when Mahon cites Treblinka in the last stanza it is exactly where this irony lingers on, although it should give way to pity with all the weight of the names Treblinka and Pompeii and the victims' plea to evoking the intruder's (and the reader's) compassion. Exploring the site, however, the protagonist feels self-ironically out of place. Like Larkin's non-believer cyclist who on a trip comes across a church and, having entered, takes off his cycle-clips "in awkward reverence" ("Church Going" 44 *wiersze* 26); like his own "local resident out for a walk / In tweeds and a hunting hat" who is the only visitor of the prehistoric site; so does the "archaeologist" in "A Disused Shed" seem embarrassed when addressed by the souls in the final exhortation: "You with your light meter and relaxed intinerary, / Let not our naive labours have been in vain!"

In the *Odyssey* and in Seferis's quoted poem, the asphodel meadows in Hades are peopled by mediocre souls. Mahon's victims of history and cataclysms are also "unimportant." In both poems they claim the intruder's attention and commemoration; in "The King of Asini" it is the poet who undertakes this task of restoring memory; while at the beginning of *Mythistorema* (Part 4, "Argonauts") the description of subsequent deaths of the speaker's companions in the Argo expedition closes with "No one remembers them. Justice" (*Collected Poems* 7). In this context, Seferis's whole cycle with its shifting attitudes, his "King of Asini," and Mahon's "Disused Shed" can be regarded as a desperate dialogue with that previous negative affirmation of historical justice. Seferis's approach in the closing part of *Mythistorema* has an intricate meaning which links to the whole cycle, while Mahon focuses on one of its aspects, dictated by the line he quotes in epigraph. "Mahon's souls are displaced to the rubbish heap and look back; Seferis's ones are in their element and look forward. The

former want to be remembered; the latter also want to teach.”⁵

For both poets irony and specifically self-irony fall into essential categories employed to handle the subjects of history, identity and creation. It also provides a potent and prolific instrument in exemplifying their personal dilemmas associated with those issues. In this way it allows them to combine the two dimensions: individual and general (related “conically” to group, tribe, nation, humankind, living creatures, nature, and finally, to universe). Travellers with a complicated attitude to the notion of home, with the background heavily determined by history, Seferis and Mahon offer no facile or complacent recipes for putting the “unstructurable sea” in order. Instead, they are haunted by nightmares of incongruity or relativity, of which (self-)irony is a perfect expression.

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⁵ I discuss these differences in a separate conference paper (“Openness and Light”) to be published in 2010 by Peter Lang.

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